

"Homeland Insecurity": A Hand-Chopped Expression of Nontraditional Creativity

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499³)

by

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Abstract

Creative expression of protest, dissent, and criticism through the arts has been an important experience for individuals and communities around the world for as long as humans have been thinking independently and envisioning alternatives for collective sustainability. As conflicting ideas, interests and beliefs find much of the world immersed in extremes, it is as important now as ever before that the frustrations and concerns which weigh upon individuals and communities find relief through expression. When done creatively, this can enable the collective development of new ideas as well as open doors to alternatives which have never been explored or even considered. In the spirit of such nontraditional expressions of concern and protest through creative means, this creative project pulls together images and seeks to reform the power of their symbolism for the purpose of artistically presenting my personal perspective on US policies relating to domestic and international security which have emerged since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Building on an academic background rooted in disaster management, political geography, and GIS, my Honors thesis is a statement of creative protest against the trajectory of the fear-fueled US War on Terror which I have conveyed through the visual medium of a hand-chopped collage titled "Homeland Insecurity".

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An Unboxed Introduction: *The Great American Run-On*

Having faded from the casual discourse of modern society, references to the United States' once youthful "New World" title now carries nostalgic qualities of purity and innocence that have been tragically exploited, abused, neglected, and ultimately discarded forever during the historic journey from early colonization and native-focused genocides to slave-trading world player and industrial superpower; all the way to the dysfunctional nuke-toting club of bully-nations and the rapidly crumbling American empire that today bears striking resemblance to some obscenely bleary-eyed drunk that rapturously touts a twelve trillion dollar bottle of booze with one hand and uses the other to unilaterally shake their red, white and blue genitalia at the disapproving global traffic during rush-hour on the international freeway; belligerently stumbling closer to the great white line that separates national security from societal self-destruction without even a momentary pause or a hesitating thought of the many immediate and far reaching consequences, the long-lost dignity and integrity; few mainstream recollections remain of the shameful, hypocritical, and globally dehumanizing behaviors which over time have wrought the grim economic, political, societal and battlefield realities by which the country is presently beset on every horizon as the government struggles to keep the systems operational whilst responding too slowly, too recklessly, and with an alarming absence of vocal expression and public action by the American people as the agents of powers ravage faraway lands, corrupt the common good, distort justice in favor of tyrants, and sell off the democracy on which the union was built, split apart and forcibly reunited.

Rooted in my own observation-founded beliefs, the unconventional nature of the preceding introductory statement is no accident. Indeed, it serves a very distinct purpose in that it offers an enlightening contrast. Despite maintaining a focus similar to that of the creative project on which it is based, the written introduction represents what the visual work likewise encompasses. It is, in essence, a stream-of-consciousness collage of words. As well, in addition to underscoring the significance of visual expression, it serves as a reminder that "a picture is worth a thousand words"; while a collage, being a composition of many images rearranged and reformed into one cohesive perception of a complex reality, is worth many thousands of words. This is a creative project and, as such, one can hardly expect to adhere to conventions and traditions. Were it so, much creativity would be lost as it gets forced back into "the box".

Weird Expressions: Roots and Fruits

I grew up in a family of non-conservative Mennonite social workers. This has enabled an observation of mainstream American culture from the position of "immersed outsider". Mine was also a nomadic background and my roots have come to span communities across the U.S. and overseas through a diverse range of travels which include a year of hitchhiking throughout the United States, six months living in Kenya, and one month residing in Russia. These ventures have also included visits to China, Europe, as well as assorted trips to Mexico and Canada. As a result, I have been afforded unique opportunities to understand many conditions and possibilities of life inside and outside of America.

On such journeys I have encountered a wide range of social, cultural, political, and economic frameworks, with first-hand exposure to the extremes and norms of the human experience around the world. Over time, these have played a major part in shaping my worldview, founding a proactive dedication to restorative justice, human rights, and the protection of the common good, and developing both a passion for creative expression and the trajectory of my path in life.

The depths of my passions are intensified by revelations of the obsessive destructiveness of man and the callous disregard for the suffering of the vanquished, as occurs in war. In my vision of the world, glimpses of suffering, devastation, hypocrisy and alienation abound alongside beauty and wondrous complexity. There is much that is absurd and ironic in all of this, as even in a wealthy country like America there is frequently insufficient access to basic needs and a place of safety due to widespread institutional failure and a studied neglect of the poor and hopeless. Like others I have encountered from all class levels, I am haunted by a longing for existential redemption and genuine intimacy, yet drowning in fears of oppression and violent death.

Much like my academic pursuits in emergency management and political geography, the stories my artwork tells are strongly influenced by my perceptions of the vast diversity of a multicultural world and the belief that civilization is the central cause for deterioration of the human condition. Through that lens, I strive to set up vivid contrasts between industrialized societies and third-world homelands through the careful selection of images as a collage artist and a poet, and have found that the social intersection of the two worlds is often fascinating and maybe aesthetically compelling while, at the same time, it can be astonishingly cruel and terrifying in its implications.

Believing creation and passion to be matters of the soul, I do not have, nor can I quickly provide, ready answers for the meanings behind the expressions I produce. I can only remain an explorer of ideas, alternatives, and the world as I perceive it.

Creative Project: "Homeland Insecurity" Collage



The Breakdown: A Review of Concepts and Themes

The collage work above is a reflection on the impact of fear after 9/11 and a statement on the delusions of hyper-security that accompanied the Global War on Terror which followed the events of that day. If the 9/11 terrorist attacks taught anything to Americans and the world, the lesson is that fear is a powerful catalyst. On the level of the individual, fear—the prevailing reaction to any disastrous event, including acts of terror—disrupts the stability of normalcy and too often results in hyper-sensitive reactivity, distrust and paranoia, and can open the way to extreme actions (Klein, 2007). It turns friends and family members against each other and makes enemies out of allies and vice versa. On the societal level, fear disintegrates cultures and opens the way for rationalized injustices. It blurs the line between patriotism and nationalism. On both levels, however, fear has the power to distort priorities and provoke reactive measures which can carry a heavy cost. Like most any work of art, this piece can be interpreted in more than one way. In this case, however, only one was intended when produced by hand over many hours of work using scissors and blades, glues and tape, and images acquired from books and magazines.

Observed with a casual glance, the image may appear to depict a patriotic vision of ideals. Blue skies and a field of flowers present a sense of serenity, while armed guards represent security. The collection of flags indicate international unity and the bound prisoner suggests that justice prevails. However, such a vision is one which those in power prefer, not the reality experienced by the vast majority of the global population.

Through another lens, the image offers a very different statement: a critique of US policies at home and abroad which were, and still are, fueled by fear. The scene is set on the front lawn of the White House, the seat of U.S. executive power and arguably the most powerful seat in the world. Emerging from the White House is a towering column, atop which sits a costly gold-bordered, globe-scanning eye that keeps watch while tracking "evil-doers" to the ends of the earth, much like the NSA and "Big Brother".

As the great eye remains ever vigilant in the background, one will see the grouping of international flags which line the White House and serve as a reminder that America acts unilaterally and will meet no country halfway. The foreground of the image is where eyes are drawn, be they of an observer, the symbolic eyes of those countries which rally around the White House or the great presidential eye. Nestled calmly among flowers on the front lawn of the White House is a man, bound and hooded, overseen by armed U.S. troops. The hooded prisoner, bearded and quite elderly, is the focus of all. Much like thousands of other "detainees" who share his extraordinarily rendered fate, he is now far from home and the proof of his guilt is hardly evident. On the lap of the hooded elder is a bowl of rocks, a meal served, representative of the "justice" exacted by US forces through mistreatment and torture of countless unnamed prisoners around the world from Abu Gharib to Guantanamo Bay.

My academic experiences have been formative sources of inspiration for the themes and concepts which are expressed in this collage. Offering a wealth of systemically relevant insights and technical knowledge in a specialized field, disaster studies have vastly expanded my awareness of domestic and international anti-terror measures and national defense strategies. These familiarities are largely related to

America's fear- frenzied "Global War on Terror" and the post-9/11 transformation of the US emergency management paradigm through broad-reaching shocks to the systems of governance at all levels through assertive legislation such as the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act, which legally expanded the globally-reaching powers of surveillance, detention, interrogation, and judicial agency exercised by US authorities (Haddow, Bullock, & Coppola, 2014; Klein, 2007). The terror-born legislation also saw to the establishment of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), which in turn absorbed the organizational body and preexisting cabinet-level status authority of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), as well as the Secret Service and Coast Guard, among others, before reconstructing the integrated operational framework to focus on the threat of terrorist acts—from outside the US and from within (Haddow et al., 2014). Furthermore, my academic pursuit of studies in disaster management and geopolitics have been additionally complemented by the technical orientation of GIS (Geographic Information Systems) which has nurtured a scientifically-rooted comprehension of the preeminent significance of physical space and the formative influence of symbols as power tools for ideological persuasion, as well as the practical roles of digital technology in mapping, tracking, and targeting hazards which threaten individuals and communities on levels ranging from local to global (Haddow et al., 2014).

While some might see serenity, security, unity, and justice in this image, another might see a reality which exists between the lines. Under clear blue skies, the watchful eye of costly American intelligence focuses on suspected threats young and old, and allies of the day rally to the side most likely to "win". Yet, as all eyes focus on the

guarded suspect at the forefront, what goes unnoticed amid all this is the fact that the front lawn of the White House has been overtaken, not by freedom-hating terrorists but by weeds.

On the Road: The "Art of Injustice" Anti-War Exhibit

In the interest of sharing these perceptions with others for the sake of discussion, regardless of whether they do or do not agree, this collage was included with additional works of my own and other artists across the country in a public art exhibit which was displayed for two months at The Cup in Muncie. The anti-war themed show, titled "Art of Injustice", focused on the less-than-savory attributes of warfare and the impact it can and does have on both sides. In addition to the visual art display the show involved two events, one at the opening of the show and another at the time of closing, which were intended to bring the community together for the purpose of conversation and friendly debate centered around forum-style panel discussions which included topics of combat experiences, trauma and PTSD, treatment of prisoners, and the nature of "just-war", among others. Although I spoke very briefly at the opening event and read two poems of mine which fit the anti-war theme, my involvement was far more evident at the second event and involved participation in a panel discussion with Dr. George Wolfe, Coordinator of Outreach at the BSU Peace Center, and outspoken local writer Blake Mellencamp, on the roles and importance of the arts in protests and politics.

Rather than offer a second-hand written account of the exhibit and my role in the public conversations which resulted, I have instead sought to provide a more convenient review of these events through inclusion of supplementary materials. These materials

include exhibit photos, video footage of the panel discussion in which I participated, the poems read during the first event, and video interviews which I gave for use by the media and a documentary film crew. In an effort to uphold my belief that art must be communicated through some sort of media if one hopes to impact the perceptions of reality held by others, I have included the following supplemental materials on the accompanying disc:

- One video recording of the 40 minute panel discussion from the closing event;
- One documentary interview about my perceptions of art as a form of protest;
- One press interview about my background and experiences with art and protest;
- Photos from the closing event of the exhibit, including the panel discussion.

Conclusion: A Review of Civilization and Self

The roots of what the modern world knows as Western civilization emerged in Western Europe and became the dominating culture, with monarchical empires and steel acting as agents of Power; fueled by bloodshed and gold, European civilization spread throughout the West and became the dominating culture, with religious empires and gunpowder acting as agents of Power; fueled by bloodshed and oil, Western civilization spread throughout the East and became the dominating culture, with corporate empires and computers acting as agents of Power; fueled to the apex of consumption, world civilization will soon run out of places to spread as the dominating standards and resource-drained agents of Power cause their own collapse.

This is why I create art that symbolically analyzes the force field dynamics of physical, social, and (geo)political disasters: in 1,000 years, 500 years, 100 years, or even less, if records of the past—and living humans —still exist, the legacy of civilization will not be a reflection of the many arts and inventions, sciences and technologies, philosophies and laws produced by human experience. Far from the legacies of ancient cave-art, world civilization will be remembered through monumentally ruinous bastions of cultural hubris for a damning history of ceaseless destruction; "Homeland Insecurity".

And so, like countless others who envision alternatives to collective self-destruction, I create.

Works Cited

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